

My Criticism of American Society

By Matsuyama Yukio

I have lived in the United States on three occasions, from 1961 to 1966, 1971 to 1977, and again from 1991 to 1992. Even while living in Japan, I visited the U.S. two or three times a year,

so I have had ample opportunity to observe changes in the country first hand. Having an affinity for America, I cannot help acknowledging, frankly speaking, that today America is no

longer as alluring as it once was. Thirty years ago, America was in good spirits and smiling faces could be seen everywhere. Even then America faced a variety of serious problems: nuclear confrontation with the former Soviet Union and the civil rights issue. But the American people believed in their future. Even now, no country is so free, so fair, so dynamic and so kind to an outsider as America. The status of women and minorities is visibly better than before. There certainly are positive sides to American society, and Japan still has many things to learn from America.

Nevertheless, I have the impression that America as a whole is in terrible shape, and discontent is growing. I often notice the prefix "dis" in newspapers and magazines, as in discontent, displeasure, disgust, disgrace, disillusion, etc. The suffix "less" is also plentiful, as in homeless, jobless, childless, fatherless, motherless, helpless, hopeless, etc. The "American dream" was based on the American people's conviction that they lived better than their parents and that their children would live better than they do. Now it is apparent that they live in smaller homes than their parents and their children will live in still smaller living quarters.

Permanent underclass

The most serious problem America now faces, it seems to me, is its dwindling middle class. I have visited about 100 foreign countries and those which favorably impressed me had a large middle class and a stable society. Ninety percent of the Japanese population considers themselves to be middle class, which greatly contributes to the stability of this society. Given the poor level of housing, sewerage and social welfare, the living conditions of Japan's middle class are much lower than those in the Scandinavian countries for example. Even so, Japanese are happy to think of themselves as middle class. Americans, if



Photo: Kyodo News Service

In the good old '60s, spurred by the "New Frontier," Kennedy's America was full of hopes and dreams.

born into a poor family, are resigned to the fact that they will never be able to climb out of the misery of their surroundings. On the other hand, Japanese people do not abandon themselves to such despair, however poor they were born.

The gap between rich and poor is rapidly expanding in America. The influx of immigrants from Latin American countries has contributed to the increase in numbers of those living in poverty, a category previously dominated by black people. This situation, as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it, has changed the nature of poverty in American society, creating a class of people who are hardly able to escape.

America is historically a country where equal opportunity prevails. Reality, however, is that Americans born into poverty find themselves at an extreme disadvantage. For these people, becoming a professional athlete or entertainer is the only way to attain a better life. Referring to this widening gap, Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, a former Harvard University professor, likened the country to two ships cruising at different speeds in different directions. It is an undeniable fact that Americans who cannot pull themselves out of poverty, no matter how hard they try, are rapidly increasing in number. "All men are created equal," Thomas Jefferson said in the Declaration of Independence. What would he say if he could see the current situation? This is not simply a problem of wealth as a similar gap also exists in education. While there are plenty of Nobel laureates, there is also an increasing number of people who cannot even read a newspaper.

Another serious problem is the lesser weight given to politics currently. Politics no longer attracts talented people in America. While this is a common phenomenon in democratic countries throughout the world today, this tendency is particularly noticeable in the U.S. During the presidency of John F. Kennedy, a stellar cast of intellectual politicians such as William Fulbright, Hubert Humphrey, Mike Mansfield and Frank Church graced the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. The quality of the U.S. Congress today is manifestly

lower. Talented people stay away from politics for various reasons: an exorbitant amount of money is needed; politicians are exposed to the mass media to an exceeding degree; being telegenic outweighs policy expertise; etc. While Bill Clinton won applause when he pledged "an end to the era of deadlock and drift" in his inaugural address, politicians must bear the blame for the current confusion and emaciation of America.

The quality of bureaucrats also remains low in the U.S. as compared with, say, Japan or France. Federal government jobs in Washington do not promise an elitist career, and talented university graduates hardly opt to pursue them. As key ambassadorial posts are held by political appointees, the morale of professional diplomats remains low and the State Department can hardly attract talented young people. This has been a vicious cycle. It is time Americans were aware of the fact that businessmen, appointed ambassadors as rewards for political donations and with little knowledge of the countries they are assigned to, have caused the U.S. great damage. Japan is an exceptionally lucky country where such high-powered ambassadors as Mike Mansfield and Walter Mondale have been posted by political appointments.

Decrease in quality

I see another problem with American business management. Executives pay too much attention to such things as quick money from mergers and acquisitions, conscious all the time of the twice-yearly stockholders meetings. They are too slow to make investments from a long-range viewpoint and forget about technological renovation, the lack of which has undermined American industry. Worse still, they continue to receive huge salaries and bonuses when company profits are down and recession conditions exist. And when times are bad, they don't hesitate to dismiss or lay off workers. The high jobless rate in America can be blamed on corporate executives' lack of a sense of social responsibility. Given such a background, it's not surprising that talented

young Americans opt out of industrial jobs with American industry becoming less productive and competitive.

The quality of labor in the U.S. has deteriorated accordingly. The United States, when I first arrived 30 years ago, struck me as a highly efficient country, but my impression of present-day America is that it is now inefficient. If you order the installation of a telephone or fax line, the work will not be completed on the first visit. With rare exception workers forget something or don't have the right parts. When traveling, you will often encounter such problems as a computer mix-up at the airport ticket counter or your luggage getting lost. Recently, when I checked into a hotel and was taken to my reserved room by a porter, I found the room already occupied by someone else. Americans themselves admit that car rentals and laundries operated by Asians provide better service and have fewer problems for customers. Japanese cars sell well in America because of their high quality. The fact that two-thirds of White House employees own foreign-made cars testifies to the unpopularity of domestic cars in America.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi once caused a furor when he publicly criticized the lack of a work ethic in America. It was indeed improper for a prime minister to make such a comment in public and it was not surprising that Americans were offended when they were criticized in comparison with Japanese. I share Miyazawa's criticism of the quality of labor, though I myself compare this quality, not by Japanese standards, but with what it was in America 30 years ago. These days I cannot but feel that American society has gone to extremes in freedom and permissiveness.

The country, to a degree, has become too sloppy. More than 1 million teenage girls become pregnant each year. In New York there are three high schools for pregnant students, 28% of whom are unmarried. A great debate is now raging in the U.S. as to whether to distribute free condoms to high school students to prevent AIDS and whether to distribute clean syringes to drug addicts, also free



Photo: Kyodo News Service

Abrupt increases in brutal teenage crimes, illegal immigrants, the unemployed, drug addicts, and the homeless—America in the 1990s has turned into an ailing superpower.

of charge. I hardly think that these phenomena represent progress or freedom. A sharp rise in the percentage of minority group members who can't speak English and an abnormal spread of narcotics abuse reflects a negative side of American liberalism. To my mind, the spread of drug addiction represents the worst vice brought about by the Vietnam War. The growing number of Americans falling prey to narcotics abuse and the diminishing number shaking off this addiction casts a dark shadow over the future.

Return of the "Old West"

Public safety has also deteriorated. American vitality is weakened by what Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger described as the reign of terror in the cities. In a country where control of guns is difficult, human lives have easily been lost. An increase in jobless workers and the irritations of minority groups has made America even more unsafe. If the civilization level of a country is judged, not by the number of its Ph.D. holders, but by the safety of lovers strolling in a park at night, America is a very uncivilized country.

I was the only Japanese journalist to cover President Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on the spot. Later, I covered the shooting deaths of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, John Lennon and

other outstanding personalities. Despite this string of unfortunate shooting incidents, America has failed to take proper measures to effectively control guns. This is one reason why America is falling into disfavor throughout the world. Recently, two Japanese students were shot dead there. In these circumstances, Americans can hardly expect to be respected by the international community, however high they hold the banner of "human rights" diplomacy.

It also appears that "me-ism" has prevailed over America to an exceeding degree. These days, few Americans pay much attention to the decrepit conditions on both sides of the highway from the airport to their home, provided their community is kept clean. They care little about their neighborhood as long as their apartment is safe. Many Americans participate in volunteer activities, which underlines their keen interest in public service. But, as American society seems to be falling apart, the negative effect of excessive individualism is evident. As I endeavor to shed light on the roots of the prevailing American social vices, from the viewpoint of an admirer of America, I wonder if the U.S. needs a great cultural revolution.

The economy will turn around in the future, but it will be impossible to turn around the quickly degenerating human mind unless great efforts are made to

renovate education. American education focuses on self-assertiveness and offensiveness. This is what underlies the proliferation of a lawyer's culture. A lawyer's weak point is that he tends to neglect historical viewpoints in favor of a quick settlement. Any country under the rule of law needs lawyers. But my impression is that lawyers, regarded as unproductive—a kind of hired gunmen for modern times—carry too much weight in American society.

What Americans need today is total harmony, thoughtfulness toward other people, modesty and the like. In lectures I have delivered at Harvard University, I received the best reaction and the warmest applause when I called for more modesty in American society. Being a devotee of Hollywood movies during my high school days, I was greatly impressed by *Casablanca*, *Shane*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *Roman Holiday*. The characters in these movies all had the spirit of self-moderation and self-sacrifice. I do not think Harvard students today learn how to acquire these good old American traits.

The applause for my lectures, I surmise, illustrates American intellectuals' sympathy with my view. As I learned about democracy during the U.S. Occupation, I well remember Benjamin Franklin's "13 virtues," including industry, frugality, modesty, moderation, discipline, chastity, etc. I know that freedom shines in a society where these virtues are respected. This lesson is the backbone of my liberalism. Benjamin Franklin would certainly deplore the present situation in America, if he was alive today.

America became the center of the postwar world not only because of its material affluence and mighty military strength but also its social charm. Being an old admirer of America, I hope to see it regain its position as the world leader, even culturally, after addressing the problems of discrimination, violence, narcotics abuse and disparity in wealth.

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